

Asociación de Historia Contemporánea
Actas del XIV Congreso

DEL SIGLO XIX AL XXI. TENDENCIAS Y DEBATES
(Alicante, 20-22 de septiembre de 2018)

Mónica Moreno Seco (coord.)
Rafael Fernández Sirvent y Rosa Ana Gutiérrez Lloret (eds.)



**BIBLIOTECA VIRTUAL
MIGUEL DE CERVANTES**
www.cervantesvirtual.com

Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes
Alicante, 2019

Asociación de Historia Contemporánea. Congreso (14.º. 2018. Alicante)

Del siglo XIX al XXI. Tendencias y debates: XIV Congreso de la Asociación de Historia Contemporánea, Universidad de Alicante 20-22 de septiembre de 2018 / Mónica Moreno Seco (coord.) & Rafael Fernández Sirvent y Rosa Ana Gutiérrez Lloret (eds.)

Alicante, Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes. 2019. 2019 pp.

ISBN: 978-84-17422-62-2

Alicante, Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 2019.

Este libro está sujeto a una licencia de “Atribución-NoComercial 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-NC 4.0)” de Creative Commons.



© 2019, Asociación de Historia Contemporánea. Congreso

Algunos derechos reservados

ISBN: 978-84-17422-62-2

Portada: *At School*, Jean-Marc Côté, h. 1900.

FIGHTING FOR ACCEPTANCE

Geoffrey W. Jensen

(Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Prescott, Arizona)

War is a driving force of history. Even in cases where the change that occurred was less than desirable or frankly even wanted. Throughout the twentieth century, the captains of this particular industry were state-based militaries. Akin to any other type of endeavor, those plying the trade of conflict have not then, or one suspects even now, agreed with how to go about carrying out change. The alteration of a society could take many forms: from the upheaval of a government and its military to the establishment of a new, or relatively different, one; the releasing of occupied territories dominated by a foreign entity or the transitioning to another foreign overseer; the potential uplifting or enslaving of an oppressed group or minority of a foreign or indigenous population, let alone the enslaving of an entire population; and the planning and ultimate carrying out of the rebuilding of a war-torn society by those who occupy it. Traditional military historians, from John Keegan to James McPherson have contended with these issues and others admirably. And as such, they will not be rehashed here.

As a War and Society historian, I am interested in the stories of minority groups and how their treatment and status as citizens changed before, during, and after a conflict. My current research examines how African American civil rights leaders cajoled-often doing so by relying on a strategy that required their race to cudgel a foreign enemy of the United States as proof of their loyalty, patriotism, and abilities-the Caucasian majority of the republic into treating them as societal equals. And consequently, how the socially conservative American military establishment played a reluctant role in carrying out progressive change for its black soldiers during the Second World War and beyond.

The Revenge of the South and the Reticence of the American military

The first thing to note is that the American military establishment of the 1940s was not inclined to change the *status quo* of white over black that dominated throughout the republic, albeit, most notoriously and viciously in the American South. In this sense, they displayed an unwillingness to break with a tradition that had been largely established and reinforced perennially with every American war since the end of the Civil War. Indeed, Reconstruction, the end result of four bloody years of civil war, turned the southern white world upside down. Former slaves were now free, and, in some cases, politically powerful, while Carpetbagging northerners invaded Dixie in what southerners believed was a calculated attempt to fleece the post-war carcass of the south. By 1877, however, what southerners considered to be a nightmare ended. Northern white Republicans, whether racially progressive or not, ended Reconstruction. As one nightmare ended, another fueled by revenge-oriented southern whites that sought to avenge their defeat during the Civil War and to restore the racial balance, began.

Wielding the power of their state governments as if it were a whip, white southerners cracked away at the recently acquired rights of the Freedmen. They were no fools, though; whites purloined the rights of blacks in a fashion that sought to avoid triggering questions about violating the Constitution, specifically, the Reconstruction Amendments (13th, 14th, and 15th). Through devices such as poll taxes, literacy requirements, and the white primary, white southerners disfranchised and snuffed out the political power of black voters and ushered in the era of Jim Crow segregation. Their efforts even sought to challenge the maxim «that the winners write the history» as they carefully crafted a fictitious pro-south version of the events of slavery, the Civil War, and beyond known as «The Lost Cause» narrative. By 1896, southern segregationists received the backing of the Supreme Court as it upheld racial segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. From this landmark case, the dubious phrase «separate but equal» was introduced into the debate over the segregation of the races. In theory, if the facilities of whites and blacks, whether they were drinking fountains or schools, were equal in quality, they could and would remain separate. The problem, however, was that *Plessy* was a legal attempt to define the matter, not a moral one. Moreover, in the New South, the facilities never matched the promise of the ruling, either. Instead, it reinforced *physically* the notion of blacks as second-class citizens. When segregation proved not enough to curtail the ambitions of African Americans, white southerners turned to the old stand-by of racial violence. For a decade, 1880 to 1890, the lynching of blacks increased dramatically⁵⁶⁴².

At the nexus of this militant behavior towards the black population were white male concerns over societal standing and the various ways it could be challenged. Of these, the one that proved to inspire the most visceral of responses was interracial sex. Throughout American slavery, white southern men had sexual relationships, whether wanted or unwanted, with black women; instead of abandoning this activity, white men went underground about their sexual escapades. Their concern, however, was not on their *own* sexual promiscuity or the pleasure they derived from it, but that of sexual liaisons between white women and black men. It is fair to say that most southern whites held a base concern about the intermixing of their race or the alleged «mongrelization» of it. But that fear was still wed to the greater issue of loss of status. White men of wealth and privilege feared interracial sex between a black man and a white woman because it threatened their stature in southern society's hierarchy. For a different reason, poor whites also worried about the class ramifications and fallout of sexual activity between the races. Interracial sex or even the hint of sexual promiscuity between a black man and white women threatened their place just above African Americans in the social pecking order⁵⁶⁴³.

The greatest beneficiaries of this bounty of consternation over interracial sex were white southern democratic politicians, who recognized the promise of plowing political fields lined with white fears over black ascendancy. Responding to the outcry of their constituents, southern white politicians pushed for further exclusion of blacks in their region and beyond; this included participation in the American military. At the state level, southern politicians largely succeeded in prohibited African American service in state militias-a victory that remained in place all the way through the Vietnam War. Emboldened by their triumphs at the state level, they also targeted black enlistment in the United States Army with a few unsuccessfully attempting to remove black

⁵⁶⁴² Alan T. NOLAN: «The Anatomy of the Myth», in Gary Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (eds.): *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. 11-34.

⁵⁶⁴³ Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHOLSSMAN: *Foxholes & Color lines: Desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 3, 5; Philip DRAY: *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, New York: Modern Library, 2003, pp. 60-61; Charles ROBINSON II: *Dangerous Liaisons: Sex and Love in the Segregated South*, Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2003, pp. 1-78.

soldiers from the ranks completely. Though their efforts failed, the War Department got the message. The American Armed Forces had counted a sizeable contingent of southerners within its ranks. With such a large population of soldiers along with the existence of several military installations in the region, the military leadership of the armed forces opted to proceed in a distinctly southern fashion when it came to matters of race. Within this conservative and racist milieu, and despite their notable historical service to the nation, African American soldiers remained segregated from whites in four all-black combat regiments-collectively, these men became known as the Buffalo Soldiers⁵⁶⁴⁴.

Throughout the early twentieth century, white racist military commanders presented many justifications for the continued segregation of troops. Often, the basis of their arguments against racial integration focused on the reliance upon negative racial stereotypes that originated with slavery and ballyhooed in the years after Reconstruction to return free blacks to a position subservient to white Americans. Many contended that blacks were too violent and unruly to lead; at other times, conversely, some commanders considered them too lazy, cowardly, and generally, child-like in their intellect to be effective warriors for the republic. Over time, these highly flawed opinions based steeped in the racist ideology of the old south received the backing of equally questionable quasi-scientific studies. When old ideas and questionable science were not enough, white commanders suggested that there was too much water under the bridge between the two races to allow them to co-exist in an integrated setting. They based their argument partially on the concept of maturity-a point that General Dwight D. Eisenhower, when probed on the matter years later, also believed prevented the successful integration of the armed forces. The past of slavery notwithstanding, by maturity, they meant that the races had not evolved to the point where they could get along sufficiently enough to function in a cohesive manner. White military leaders were convinced that blacks and whites, if housed within the same unit, would fall into bickering and fighting. The last thing the armed forces hierarchy or a commander of a unit on the ground wanted was anarchy amongst their troops. If the races could not coexist, then the effectiveness of the unit, whether it was a support unit or a combat unit, would falter⁵⁶⁴⁵.

Regardless of the white racism that instigated both situations, two incidents in Texas reinforced white commanders' fears of degrading the ranks by way of the intermixing of the races. In 1906, according to white accounts, unprovoked black soldiers stationed in Brownsville, Texas had allegedly opened fire on citizens of the town. Relying on questionable evidence and racial stereotyping, President Theodore Roosevelt discharged all the men of 1st Battalion, 25th Infantry Regiment. Eleven years later, in 1917, African American soldiers again met face to face with racism in Texas, this time in Houston. In retaliation for the unprovoked beating of two black soldiers, about a hundred men from 3rd Battalion, 24th Infantry launched an assault on the city. In the wake of the violence, sixteen whites and twenty-three blacks were killed⁵⁶⁴⁶.

⁵⁶⁴⁴ Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHLOSSMAN: *Foxholes...*, pp. 2-6; Frank N. SCHUBERT: «From Black Regulars to Buffalo Soldiers: The Emergence of a Legend», in Geoffrey W. JENSEN (ed.): *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Race and the American Military*, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 115-126.; Michael F.HOLT: *By One Vote: The Disputed Presidential Election of 1876*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2008, pp. 150, 175-203; C. Vann WOODWARD: *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 3-21, 186-204.

⁵⁶⁴⁵ Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHOLSSMAN: *Foxholes...*, pp. 14-15, 20-24.

⁵⁶⁴⁶ Bernard C. NALT: *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military*, New York: Free Press, 1986, pp. 90-106; Jeffery T. SAMMONS and John H. MORROW, Jr.: *Harlem's Rattlers and the Great War: The*

The concerns of racial animosity and efficiency congealed to create a powerful argument against integration. But there was something else. Army leadership, along with the rest of the armed forces, believed that it was not their place to challenge the laws and social norms of society. This included the American South and its steady embrace of Jim Crow segregation. To act in such manner, they believed, deviated away from the primary purpose of the military, which was the defense of the nation. Worse, it would place it firmly in the crosshairs of the segregated American South and draw the ire of powerful southern politicians in Washington who not only represented Jim Crow segregation, but also controlled the military's purse strings⁵⁶⁴⁷.

This begs the question, though, if white America did not want them, why did it continue to acquiesce to demands to include them within the ranks? Why continue to fall back on a minority group whose population amounted to around 10-12% of the American population? As historian David Brion Davis observed, white America in this tale of racial disharmony continued to find itself a slave to «the doctrine of necessity». Repeatedly, it became apparent to the white American majority that if they were to win the cause they were currently engaged in that they had better employ the services of black men to don the uniforms of the armies of the republic-but not always for the sole purpose of fighting. Put another way, each war, in its own way, required an all available hands on deck approach to defeating whatever bane the nation faced. From waging war against English Tyranny to Vietnamese Communism and everything in-between, the white community, whether it *wanted* it or not, *needed* the African American community⁵⁶⁴⁸.

The call for African American involvement in the armed forces emanated from black America, however, not white America. From the Revolution onward, a voice, sometimes a chorus, rang out calling for black inclusion in the fight. For instance, without the timely writings, social and political activism, and continuous prodding of Frederick Douglass, along of course with the necessity of the moment, the black man would have struggled to affix «an eagle on his button...», or for that matter, a «musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket...» during the Civil War. That is not to say it would not have happened without his involvement as there were those white Union commanders and politicians during the brutal struggle that were sympathetic to the enlisting of free and enslaved black men if for no other reason to win the war. Douglass mattered because he was black and understood and articulated repeatedly the social injustices and indignities of the African American community in such a fashion that captured the hearts and minds of both black and white to the cause of equality. His work mattered historically as it helped wed black service to the prospect of earning racial equality through combat service. And Douglass did so knowing full well that many whites in the Union did not want his or his races help. This, in of itself, was another trend that began. From Douglass onward, black leaders repeatedly proved willing to enter a Faustian bargain with whites to include their race in the fight and did so by dangerously clinging to the notion that their race's sacrifice was meritorious enough to earn a metaphorical badge of honor that proved their worthiness as societal equals⁵⁶⁴⁹.

There were other reasons for service to the country to be sure. The black community believed that service in the military offered them a chance to partially escape the woes of segregation-a

Undaunted 369th Regiment and the African American Quest for Equality, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014, pp. 34-36.

⁵⁶⁴⁷ Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHOLSSMAN: *Foxholes...*, pp. 21-24.

⁵⁶⁴⁸ David BRION DAVIS introduction, in Christopher LESLIE BROWN and Philip D. MORGAN (eds.): *Arming Slaves: From Classical times to the Modern Age*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, pp. 3.

⁵⁶⁴⁹ «Men of Color to Arms!», *Douglass' Monthly*, August 1863.

continuing belief that lasted until the Vietnam War, when a younger generation of African American soldiers reared during the Civil rights movement questioned many of the remnants of racism in the American Armed Forces and the society it served to protect⁵⁶⁵⁰. In spite of its remaining flaws, a career in the military potentially offered a greater opportunity for upward mobility, many African American personnel believed, than they could achieve in the civilian world. Equally important, the military did not discriminate in pay. Questions over whether promotion was always equally achieved between the races aside, a white private and a black private in the Army made the same amount of money. Progressive benefits that came with the overall reform of the military throughout the twentieth century, such as dependent health care and education for a soldier's children, even if segregated (though with the reform of the military this, too, changed), sweetened the deal for black soldiers as well. A life in the military also provided African American men with a sense of accomplishment. The opportunity to defend their nation and to live in a fashion that was superior to the majority of their race instilled great pride in these men and their families. Congealing all of this together was their patriotism. African American citizens, despite the racism and bigotry they faced, genuinely felt tied to a nation that they had helped to create. In turn, the black community viewed their black soldiers with great admiration and held them in high regard. «We Negroes had little, at the turn of the century, to help sustain our faith in ourselves except the pride that we took in the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry,» historian Rayford Logan observed. And though the results often failed to satisfy the weight of the obligation on the African American community, it was, as historians Jeffrey T. Sammons and John H. Morrow, Jr. wryly put it, a matter of being «damned if you do and damned if you don't». Essentially, what else could African Americans have done but embrace the historical motif, one that was deeply engrained in the lexicon of the republic, of war as a motivator for change?⁵⁶⁵¹

World War I

As with other American conflicts, the right to fight in World War I was a long, grueling and biting unfair, slog for the nation's blacks. And though there were those who openly, as others of their race had done throughout American history, questioned involvement in a war that they likely would receive little in return for, their concerns were drowned out by the larger clamoring for involvement. The head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP), W.E.B. Du Bois, viewed the tumultuous war unfolding in Europe as an opportunity for the African American community to prove their mettle in combat. It was, therefore, time to «Close Ranks» and do battle with a common enemy:

⁵⁶⁵⁰ An excellent analysis of the situation as it pertained to black satisfaction in the military during the Vietnam War can be found in James E. WESTHEIDER: *The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008 and *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War*, New York: New York University Press, 1997.

⁵⁶⁵¹ Quoted in Jack FONER: *Blacks and the Military in American History*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974, pp. 53, see also 53-54; Richard M. DALFIUME: *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts: 1939-1953*, Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1975, pp. 20; Gail BUCKLEY: *American Patriots*, New York: Random House, 2001, pp. 16-17, 89, 184-85; Nalty, pp. 107-109; Sammons and Morrow, Jr., pp. 22-24.

That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while the war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.

DuBois effectively linked the cause of the African American community, namely, civil rights reform, to President Woodrow Wilson's belief that «The World must be made safe for Democracy». Still, there was more to this call to action for Du Bois than grasping at the brass ring of equality. About a decade prior to the Great War, he had also called upon «The Talented Tenth» of his race to rise and lead:

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.

This call was not limited to domestic issues. It was clear that he intended the elite of his race to be involved in the crucible of European combat to demonstrate themselves as worthy equals to whites by defeating a common threat, while also serving as role models for the rest of the African American community⁵⁶⁵².

Under the stipulations of the Selective Service Act of 1917, 367,000 black soldiers were inducted into the military; however, the racism present within turn of the century American society largely prevented most from serving in combat for their country. As a result, ninety percent of African American soldiers in the Army during the Great War served in support units; therefore, they fought to make the world safe for democracy in the motor pool, in ammo and supply depots, or as cooks. Those that did serve in combat largely did so under the auspices of the Ninety-Second Division, which remained attached to the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), and the Ninety-Third Division, a collective of all-black National Guard units dispatched to the French. The latter was a cause of particular concern for the AEF leadership; so much so, that a French attaché, Col. Louis Linard, issued a directive to his fellow countrymen delineating the difference between French treatment of their colonial African forces and how that clashed with white America's views on black America. He bluntly observed: «They [white America] are afraid that contact with the French will inspire in black Americans aspirations which to them (the whites) appear intolerable. It is of the utmost importance that every effort be made to avoid profoundly estranging American opinion.» According to Linard, the black man was a citizen by law, but largely viewed by whites «as an inferior being with whom relations of business or service only are possible». Importantly, white American males viewed him as a sexual savage of sorts:

The vices of the Negro are a constant menace to the American who has to repress them sternly. For instance, the black American troops in France have, by themselves, given rise to as many complaints for attempted rape as all the rest of the army. And yet the (black American) soldiers

⁵⁶⁵² Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHOLSSMAN: *Foxholes...*, pp. 117; W.E.B. Du Bois: «Close Ranks,» *The Crisis* 16, no. 3 (July 1918), pp. 111; Ronald R. KREBS: *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship Ithaca*, Cornell University Press, 2006, p. 125; W.E.B. DUBOIS: «The Talented Tenth», in Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DUBOIS, Paul LAURENCE DUNBAR, Charles W. CHESNUTT, and others: *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-Day*, New York: James Pott & Company, 1903, pp. 33; see also 40.

sent us have been the choicest with respect to physique and morals, for the number disqualified at the time of mobilization was enormous.

Though the alleged «vices» of black soldiers proved to be unfounded and untrue, they serve as a reminder of the staying power that racist ideology hailing from the peculiar institution of slavery had on the Americans and as a by-product of the war, her allies. In order to maintain American support, French commanders were strongly encouraged to follow three courses of action when it came to African American personnel:

1. We must prevent the rise of any pronounced degree of intimacy between French officers and black officers. We may be courteous and amiable with these last, but we cannot deal with them on the same plane as with white American officers without deeply offending the latter. We must not eat with them, must not shake hands or seek to talk or meet with them outside the requirements of military service.
2. We must not commend too highly the black American troops, particularly in the presence of (white) Americans. It is all right to recognize their good qualities and their services, but only in moderate terms strictly in keeping with the truth.
3. Make a point of keeping the native cantonment population from «spoiling» the Negroes. (White) Americans become greatly incensed at any public expression of intimacy between white women with black men. They have recently uttered violent protests against a picture in the «Vie Parisienne» entitled «The Child of the Desert» which shows a (white) woman in a «cabinet particulier» with a Negro. Familiarity on the part of white women with black men is furthermore a source of profound regret to our experienced colonials who see in it an overweening menace to the prestige of the white race.

Though, the French were not above racism, their treatment of colonial forces was in stark contrast to that of the Americans and therefore, they were largely insulted by the suggestions on how to handle black American soldiers under their care. Their intransigence on the matter paid big dividends for them. For instance, the performance of the all-black Ninety-Third Division, composed of the 369th-372nd Divisions, proved exemplary as they received tremendous praise and military honors from their grateful French commanders who had taken the time to re-train and properly equip them⁵⁶⁵³.

While black troops performed well under the auspices of the French, the same could not be said of the Ninety-Second Division, which remained under AEF control. Instead of exploring why one division succeed, while another faltered, racist white leadership of the AEF preferred to fall back on racial stereotypes and a good bit of scapegoating. During the Argonne offensive, the Ninety-Second Division's 368th Infantry Regiment fell into shambles. According to contemporary accounts, black soldiers of the troubled unit were cowardly malcontents that refused to engage the enemy. Modern historians have absolved the regiment of much of the blame as they discovered that the unit was ill-prepared for combat, lacked the proper equipment, let alone maps in some cases, and was led by questionable and racist white leadership. But in the post-Great War era, a

⁵⁶⁵³ Bernard C. NALTY: *Strength...*, pp. 111-112; «A French Directive», *The Crisis*, XVIII (May 1919), pp. 16-18; also available online, see «A French Directive», *The Crisis*, XVIII (May, 1919), pp. 16-18, The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition: <https://glc.yale.edu/french-directive>. Sammons and Morrow, pp. 307-310.

narrative of racial failure lived on and did so by making the Ninety-Second's woes as prima facie evidence of the inability of black soldiers to fight⁵⁶⁵⁴.

Building a powerful political base

Throughout the early twentieth century, African Americans were on the move. During the Great Migration (1910-1940), an estimated two million black citizens abandoned the south for the urban factories of the north. The northern region of the United States served as a sort of American version of Canaan for them; a place where they believed they would be treated equally and fairly. In the north, however, black migrants encountered racism just as virulent if less sanctioned under law. Racist hiring practices, restrictions on their living in some neighborhoods, and segregation in northern schools prevented African Americans from fully realizing their dreams of freedom and equality. That said, they found their right to vote unimpaired. A fact not lost on the politicians of the early twentieth century as northern Democrats and Republicans both courted the urban black vote. Civil rights leaders, representing African American special interest groups, such as the NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL), also recognized the emerging power of the black vote in the north and harnessed it into a potent political weapon against racial segregation and prejudice. The black community also gained a measure of confidence in the power of the federal government by way of the New Deal. Though Rooseveltian policies failed to provide a panacea for all of black America's societal ills, the existence of a progressive and active government gave them renewed hope in the American system. They were not naïve, though. African Americans knew all too well that southern segregationists occupying seats in the House and Senate could also use the government against the black community to further their region's dogmatic embrace of Jim Crow⁵⁶⁵⁵.

World War II

On the precipice of World War II, African American civil rights leaders remained subscribed to the idea that American involvement in war provided their community with an opportunity to stake their claim for equal treatment. While they developed many varying strategies to enact reform in American society, none were as unique as their decision, made in the First World War, to entwine domestic racial problems with American idealism. Civil rights leaders, such as W.E.B. Dubois, used the longstanding American belief of American exceptionalism, the idea that the American nation was destined to play a special role in the world, against racist white America. Through the juxtaposition of American racism with its idealism, civil rights advocates illuminated the hypocrisy of the republic. Taken in full, criticisms by activists such as Mary White Ovington, co-founder of the NAACP and James Weldon Johnson, a multi-talented and creative author, musician,

⁵⁶⁵⁴ John HOPE FRANKLIN and Alfred A. MOSS, Jr.: *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, eighth ed., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, pp. 360; Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHOLSSMAN: *Foxholes...*, pp. 6-7, 16-19; Bernard C. NALTY: *Strength...*, pp. 115; Buckley, pp. 162-166, 180-182; Dalfiume, pp. 20.

⁵⁶⁵⁵ Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHOLSSMAN: *Foxholes...*, pp. 28-35.

and educator can be summarized as follows: How could the United States fight a war against Fascism, Nazism, and Japanese imperialism, and thus, to make the world safe for democracy, when it denied those very rights that lay at the heart of a democratic society to a segment of its own population?⁵⁶⁵⁶

In the spring of 1940, the NACCP held its annual conference in Philadelphia. During that meeting the various beliefs and strategies, whether the badge of honor philosophy or the hypocritical nature of the nation were on display as civil rights leaders continued to agitate for integration, in the military, but also society at large. Current events, however, also provided another cause for them to utilize: «Hitlerism.» The threat of an ultra-conservative and racist authoritarian leader in Germany was not lost on civil rights leaders or their constituents. In many ways, the rallying cry against «Hitlerism» was part of a larger narrative that included what Jesse Owens achieved in Germany as he ran circles around the competition in the 1936 Olympic games or what Joe Lewis proved with his stunning first round knockout of Max Schmeling in 1938 for the Heavyweight crown and that was that black lives, rights, and freedoms mattered⁵⁶⁵⁷.

Going into the fall of 1940, service as combat soldiers remained an important issue to civil rights leaders, but so did ending racial segregation within the armed forces. Leading the effort to integrate the military was A. Phillip Randolph, the leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Randolph, along with contemporary civil rights leaders, Arnold Hill, and Walter White met with President Franklin Roosevelt in late September. While the president noted the achievements that had been made, namely a pledge of inclusion of blacks in all branches of the military, the civil rights contingent sought more. They encouraged him to end segregation in the entire American defense community overall—from the selection of military personnel at the local level by draft boards to improving opportunities throughout. FDR's willingness to hear the men out caused a sense of hope that further changes could be in the works. The War Department, though, proved unwilling to budge much further than allowing blacks to serve in each branch—predominately in supportive, or in the case of the Navy, subservient, careers such as the Steward's Branch. To make matters worse, Steve Early, Roosevelt's Press Secretary, released an erroneous statement that falsely claimed that Randolph, Hill, and White had supported the token reform of the War Department, and furthermore, believed in maintaining racial segregation in the military. After an onslaught of angry letters from black citizens and critical editorials from the African American press, the White House rescinded the statement. But the damage was already done. In the meantime, Randolph, who had had his fill of meetings, upped the ante. If Roosevelt would not come to terms with the black community on the issue, then Randolph was going to bring the community to the president. With over ten thousand African Americans at his side, he threatened to launch an all-black non-violent march on Washington under the banner of racial reform in the defense establishment⁵⁶⁵⁸.

In this game of political chicken, Roosevelt, who counted on the support of urban black voters as part of his larger New Deal voting coalition, blinked first. Under the auspices of Executive Order 8802, the president prohibited discrimination, whether it was racial, religious, or ethnic, in

⁵⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35; Jonathan ROSENBERG: *How Far the Promised Land?: World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 5, 39-43.

⁵⁶⁵⁷ Jonathan ROSENBERG: *How Far...*, pp. 133-135.

⁵⁶⁵⁸ Jonathan ROSENBERG: *How Far...*, pp. 138-139; Doris KEARNS GOODWIN: *No Ordinary Time: Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, pp. 168-171.

America's wartime defense industry. Additionally, the executive order created the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) which was charged with investigating cases of discrimination within the work place. Out of an effort to restore black confidence in the administration, Roosevelt made further symbolic, though noteworthy, changes. The White House compelled the War Department to go forward with plans to establish a black flying squadron within the Army Air Corps. This all-black unit would ultimately be stationed and trained in Tuskegee, Alabama. The War Department also named an African American, Judge William Hastie, to be its first Negro Affairs adviser. The Army, which had never had a black general, received its first one when Benjamin O. Davis Sr. was promoted in 1940. As was expected, these maneuvers met with criticism in the south, notably the announcement of Davis' promotion went over poorly in the region. «Are you crazy appointing a nigger as General in the U.S Army?», a West Virginian man disgustedly wondered⁵⁶⁵⁹.

FDR largely pushed the issue for political reasons. His motivation for doing so, however, was not self-driven. Though, he understood to an extent the trials and tribulations of the African American community, he remained, to a fault, a practical political animal. It was about achieving as much as he could within the voting coalition he had netted together. After all, southern politicians in congress controlled the mechanisms of the state and could curtail his political agenda. This political reality emerges when examining many of FDR's struggles with civil rights throughout his time in office. Instead of eradicating the specter of Judge Lynch, which was largely used to maintain the dominance of the white over black, FDR dodged the issue. When it came to the New Deal, Roosevelt's progressive legislative program designed to uplift and reform American society during the Great Depression, it failed to offer much to the nation's black population. The issue had to be brought to him in such a manner to force him to act. Still, though the civil rights leadership outside of the West Wing had done just that, they were not enough to get the president to move. Someone else had to apply pressure, daily, from within; one of his most trusted political confidants, his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt⁵⁶⁶⁰.

Much like Franklin, Eleanor, was not without her own faults on the issue of race; her background was one of privilege and gentility, a way of life directly supported, by the presence of those from the lower classes that catered to her needs. Members of her family hailed from the American south, which aided in her early education in the societal gospel of white over black. However, much like her husband's eventual successor, Harry S. Truman of Missouri, Eleanor evolved on the issue as she familiarized herself with the situation facing America's blacks. The more willing she was to understand the injustices that they faced, the more determined Eleanor became to advocate for American blacks-from fundraising, to leaving the Daughters of the American Revolution, to having her picture taken with blacks visiting the White House and more. She became the principal ear and voice of the African American community within the White House. This all came with a political price, however, for the president as complaints emerged throughout the government-notably, the civilian chief of the War Department, Henry Stimson, loathed her involvement in the racial affairs of the military- to the American South. To an extent, Eleanor's activities, including her infamous joy ride with a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, proved to be an effective scapegoating mechanism that allowed her critics in and outside the government to deflect criticism from themselves to the First Lady for the inclusion of blacks within

⁵⁶⁵⁹ Jonathan ROSENBERG: *How Far...*, pp. 139-140; Quoted in Doris KEARNS GOODWIN: *No Ordinary...*, pp. 172.

⁵⁶⁶⁰ Doris KEARNS GOODWIN: *No Ordinary...*, pp. 163.

the ranks. It was within this social and political milieu that the pejorative term «Eleanor Roosevelt's Niggers» was born and remained affixed to her for the rest of her life. While members of American society bitterly complained about the matter for years to come, FDR handled it at the time in his own charming, if not sarcastic way, as he informed Eleanor: «You can say anything you want. I can always say, 'Well, this is my wife; I can't do anything about her'». And to the president's credit, he never did⁵⁶⁶¹.

While the president acted for political, and perhaps, we can say out of respect to Eleanor's prodding, personal reasons, the armed forces felt no desire or compulsion to go any further. To the leadership of the military, the continued drive for black inclusion was less about waging war against the republic's enemies, instead, they viewed it as that of a political endeavor of an outspoken minority seeking improvement for their race-thus, they were effectively committing the unpatriotic, and thus, for some, moral, sin of putting their race's needs over that of the rest of the country. In response, and in full harmony with the military's reluctance to act, the Adjutant General of the Army, Col Eugene R. Householder, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, stated explicitly:

The Army is not a sociological laboratory; to be effective it must be organized and trained according to the principles which will insure success. Experiments to meet the wishes and demands of the champions of every race and creed for the solution of their problems are a danger to efficiency, discipline and morale and would result in ultimate defeat.

The argument against becoming a sociological laboratory buttressed various aspects of white military leader's concerns about becoming involved in racial matters; most importantly, their underlying concerns about military efficiency. If the Army, for example, bowed to political pressure from a group such as the NAACP to improve the situation facing black soldiers off-base in the American south, it would cause, they believed, irreparable damage between the Army and the local community, which likely would not support that change. This would affect recruiting, bases, and personnel in the region⁵⁶⁶².

Though weary to the role they would play and likely to the dismay of those whites in the military that did not want them, the African American community responded to the call to arms brought about by the attack on Pearl Harbor in an overwhelming fashion as over three million, the vast majority of which, 700,000, served in the Army, signed up for the chance to go to war for their country. The actions of civil rights leaders, the capitulation of Roosevelt, and the call from the African American press for a «Double V campaign» that defeated the Axis powers and racism in America had encouraged African Americans to register for war. Other factors, such as members of their community serving on selective service boards also played a role as fewer blacks were unfairly disqualified from military service-a problem that they had encountered in the past⁵⁶⁶³.

Once in the fight, black soldiers discovered that they would play a greater role than their twentieth century predecessors. As with the Great War, African Americans served predominately in support units. But, the pressure tactics of civil rights advocates had paid off as some black

⁵⁶⁶¹ Doris KEARNS GOODWIN: *No Ordinary...*, pp. 161-171; J. Todd MOYE: *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 50-53.

⁵⁶⁶² Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHOLSSMAN: *Foxholes...*, pp. 23; Quoted in Morris J. MACGREGOR, Jr.: *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965*, Washington, D. C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1981, pp. 23.

⁵⁶⁶³ FRANKLIN..., pp. 481-482; BUCKLEY..., pp. 272-275.

soldiers served in various combat roles, occupations, and all-black units. The most famous example, of course, was the Tuskegee Airmen. Led by Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., a West Point graduate and the son of the Army's first black general, Benjamin O. Davis Sr., the Tuskegee Airmen carved out a reputation for African Americans in the skies.

Often overshadowed by the awe inspiring-nature of the famed flyers were the African American armored personnel of the war. The most effective and famous of these units were the Black Panthers of the 761st All-Black Tank Battalion; a group of fighting men that had been dispatched to bolster General George S. Patton's Third Army, amongst other groups, while making a name for themselves on the battlefield. Although «Old Blood and Guts» had shown concerns over the intellectual fighting abilities of African American soldiers, he embraced the black tankers as welcome allies against the greater threat of the Wehrmacht. During his first meeting with the 761st, the general, as he was often wont to do, got straight to the point:

Men, you are the first Negro tankers to ever fight in the American army. I would never have asked for you if you weren't good. I have nothing but the best in my army. I don't care what color you are, so long as you go up there and kill the Kraut sonsofbitches. Everyone has their eyes on you, and is expecting great things of you. Most of all, your race is looking forward to your success. Don't let them down, and, damn you, don't let me down. They say it is patriotic to die for your country. Well, let's see how many patriots we can make out of those German sonsofbitches⁵⁶⁶⁴.

Interestingly, the men of the 761st, as they would do with Eleanor Roosevelt, ascribed a certain level of patronage to the famed general with the custom-made uniforms and ivory handled pistols; and did so, even after the war, despite Patton's continued doubting of their abilities as fighters⁵⁶⁶⁵.

The efforts of both, aside, the partial integration of black and white troops during the Battle of the Bulge was one the most critical events in recent African American military history. Unexpectedly, in 1945, Hitler launched a desperate counter-offensive against allied forces in western Europe. The counter-offensive had caught the Allies off guard. Short on men, and with the blessing of the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe, General Eisenhower, the Army offered African Americans largely relegated to support roles the opportunity to fight side-by-side with whites. Over four thousand volunteers later, African Americans fought in segregated all-black platoons that were situated next to all-white platoons. Together this quasi-integrated force repelled the German advance. Although they had fought well together, after the German threat was vanquished, segregation of forces resumed⁵⁶⁶⁶.

⁵⁶⁶⁴ Quoted in Charles W. SASSER: *Patton's Panthers: The African-American 761st Tank Battalion in World War II*, New York: Pocket Books, 2004, pp. 68; also quoted in Carlo D'ESTE: *Patton: A Genius for War*, New York: HarperCollins books, 1996, pp. 726.

⁵⁶⁶⁵ For some, within the African American military community, which included its white command personnel, the pejorative term «Eleanor Roosevelt's Niggers» will become a symbol of unity for themselves and their appreciation of the First Lady and her actions. As David Williams, a Yale graduate and white officer in the 761st Tank Battalion reasoned years after the fact, «I want them [African American relatives and general community], by damn, to see and to hear what Eleanor Roosevelt's Niggers did! I want the whole world to know!» For more see, John Keasler, 'Eleanor Roosevelt's Niggers', *The Miami-News*, January 26, 1978.

⁵⁶⁶⁶ Gail BUCKLEY: *American...*, pp. 277-278, 282-294; SASSE..., pp. 9, 67-68; George S. PATTON: *War as I knew It*, New York: Mariner Books, 1995, pp. 159-160.

Conclusion

From this overview of the African American community's pursuit of military service leading up to the era of World War II several things can be gleaned. Though notable exceptions existed, the leadership of the armed forces did not actively seek out black volunteers. Part of the reason for their inclusion was the result of political pressure from civil rights leaders in and outside of black America. It was also the inevitable outcome brought about by the necessity of each military conflict. Once it was clear that blacks would serve, the next dilemma became *how* they would do so. White commanders alleged that a real threat to the functionality of the military-and to the social norms of white American society-could arise with black combat service. Let alone any attempt to racially integrate the ranks. This meant that the armed forces operated in a manner that was largely inefficient by creating essentially two forces: one white, one black and did so paradoxically in the name of efficiency⁵⁶⁶⁷.

Despite white commanders, politicians, and personnel's continued desire to not have to deal with black soldiers in the American Armed Forces, Civil rights leaders, from Douglass on, viewed black military service as a gateway to societal acceptance and elevation. Service in the armies of the republic, however, were not enough. African Americans need to fight, and in some cases, die to prove their race's intellectual and physical mettle as combatants. Equally important, the very best of their race, Du Bois' «Talented Tenth», had to lead their brethren on the battlefield; and by doing so, they would be able to lead their race off of it.

African Americans were not alone in their fight for inclusion. Sympathetic progressive whites, at differing points, emerged as part of the driving force for change. During the Second World War, the most important was Eleanor Roosevelt. Her activities in support of black service during the war made the difference. As one of the principal political advisers, and partner, of the president, she had unprecedented access to the executive branch. This, along with appealing to the needs of an aspect of his political coalition, moved the needle with FDR enough for him to act.

Once given the opportunity to fight, and to do so under supportive leadership that sought to train and command these men as equals, African Americans did not disappoint. For example, units such as the Buffalo Soldiers, the Ninety-Third Division, the Tuskegee Airmen, the 761st Tank Battalion, those who volunteered to repel the desperate gambit of the Nazis and aided in victory during the Battle of the Bulge, and others all performed beyond expectations.

If there is a lesson to be learned from all this, especially in today's era where the races once again are being pulled away from each other in America, but also internationally, by the forces of ignorance, fear and hatred, it is this. Though these moments matter in our understanding of the long history of African American military involvement, not a single one of these sacrifices led to the instant integration of the armed forces or an improvement in the treatment of their race. After the end of World War II, it would take another three years, further political agitation from white and black civil rights leaders, the tenacity of the 1948 presidential election, and the social maturation of the president, Harry S. Truman, before racial integration took hold. After that, it took several more decades to begin to address the various remnants of racism within the ranks. Indeed, it is an endeavor that continues to this day.

⁵⁶⁶⁷ Sherie MERSHON and Steven SCHOLSSMAN: *Foxholes...*

African American military service is not simply black history. It is more than the story of a race who repeatedly sacrificed themselves over the various epochs of American history for a nation that at best marginally appreciated their sacrifice, at worst, ignored it. Nor is it just one of many narratives emanating from the field of War and Society history about how war, or service in one of the armies doing battle, can change the fortunes of an individual or, in this case, a race. It is the story of human beings very basic need to be included as opposed to being apart. That togetherness in common concert for a cause-in this case, becoming societal equals with whites as American citizens-overshadowed what was really needed and desired all along. What really mattered, and has always mattered, for African Americans, or for that matter any other minority group that has sought willingly, and perhaps recklessly, to fight for a nation that habitually considers them unworthy or unequal, was not societal equality or equal treatment as citizens-though, minorities have had to settle for this-but instead acceptance as fellow human beings.